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Robin R. Wang

Loyola Marymount University, rwang@lmu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Wang, Robin. (2005, July). Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained ("Taijitu Shou"): A Construction of the Confucian Metaphysics. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66:(3), 307-323.

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Author(s): Robin R. Wang

Source: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Jul., 2005), pp. 307-323

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3654184>

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Zhou Dunyi's *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained* (*Taijitu shuo*): A Construction of the Confucian Metaphysics

Robin R. Wang

Introduction

As Derk Bodde correctly has stated, “The theory of *yin* and *yang*, the five elements, and their correlates, has for more than two thousand years been the basis for Chinese medicine, alchemy, astronomy, and naturalistic speculation generally.”¹ However the *yinyang* theory provides not only a conceptual basis for Chinese natural science but also a theoretical foundation, within Neo-Confucian moral philosophy, for its teachings on self-cultivation. One of the key points at which the link between Chinese natural philosophy and ethics can be observed is in the work of Zhou Dunyi (Chou Tun-i, 1017–73 CE). Zhou Dunyi, the forerunner of Neo-Confucianism and founder of *Daoxue* in the Song dynasty, published a diagram of the Supreme Ultimate (*taijitu*) and wrote a concise 256-word philosophical account of it (*taijitu shuo*). Zhou’s groundbreaking effort sets the parameters in which the *yinyang* theory was to be assimilated metaphysically and systematically into Confucian thought and practice. By presenting Zhou Dunyi’s diagram and the full translation of his *taijitu shuo*, this essay will call attention to Zhou’s thought and seek to understand it on its own merits. The justification for a fresh look at Zhou Dunyi’s original endeavor will become apparent in the conclusion to this paper, which will argue that Zhou Dunyi’s distinctive approach to the *yinyang* theory may have a valuable bearing on contemporary discussions on the subject of the

¹ Derk Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 135.

historical development of Chinese philosophy, particularly on the progression of the *yinyang* theory.

Obviously, Zhou Dunyi was not the first Confucian to bring the *yinyang* cosmology into Confucian philosophy. A millennium earlier, the Han thinker, Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu, 179–104 BCE), commonly regarded as the founder of Imperial Confucianism, explored the relationship between the *yinyang* theory and Confucian morality. Compared with Zhou Dunyi, Dong Zhongshu's perspective is static and a departure from the original meanings of *yinyang*.² Dong Zhongshu turned the *yinyang* cosmology into a conceptual validation of imperial Confucianism's commitment to a hierarchical vision of nature and human relationships. It favored a pattern of subordination within human relationships rather than a correlative understanding of social harmony.³ Dong Zhongshu succeeded in canonizing a particular interpretation of Confucian moral philosophy, one that was criticized, beginning with the May 4th Movement, for its authoritarianism, and its tendency to support the domination of women. By contrast, Zhou Dunyi's metaphysics and ontology created a possibility to reopen these questions, in ways that demonstrate the promise of progress beyond the authoritarian phase initiated with Han Confucianism, and transmitted and expanded in various ways by Neo-Confucians for centuries to come.

As a survey of the relevant historical texts indicates, it is difficult to exaggerate the magnitude of Zhou Dunyi's contribution. Zhou is often regarded as one of the five Song masters⁴ who first formulated the Neo-Confucian "vista and determined its direction." Zhou Dunyi is appraised as "the pioneer" who "laid the pattern of metaphysics and ethics for later Neo Confucianism."⁵ Wing-tsit Chan claims that Zhou Dunyi's originality consists in assimilating "the Taoist element of non-being to Confucian thought," now carefully removed from "the fantasy and mysticism of Taoism."⁶ If Neo-Confucianism is generally to be distinguished from earlier forms of Confucian thought by its adaptation of Daoist and Buddhist views, then Zhou Dunyi should be deemed as the first to demonstrate how fruitful this could be. Through Zhou Dunyi's efforts Confucian thought finally acquired an appropriately positive meta-

² For more detailed argument on this point, see Robin R. Wang's essay, "Dong Zhongshu's Transformation of Yin/Yang Theory and Contesting of Gender Identity," *Philosophy East & West*, 55.2 (2005), 209–31.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Other four are Shao Yong (1011–77); two Chen's brothers: elder brother Chen Hao (1032–85), the younger brother Chen Yi (1033–1107); and their uncle, Zhang Zai (1020–76).

⁵ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 460. Similar explanations are to be found in Siu-chi Huang's work on eight major Neo-Confucian philosophers. Siu-chi Huang, *Essentials of Neo-Confucianism: Eight Major Philosophers of the Song and Ming Periods* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 19–36.

⁶ Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 460.

physical foundation, one that bases Confucian moral teaching on an ontology that inspired successive generations of Neo-Confucians' in their philosophical reflections.

The precise nature of Zhou Dunyi's influence upon later thinkers regarded as essential to Neo-Confucianism is itself controversial. Though appointed by an old friend, Cheng Xiang, to tutor his two sons, Cheng Hao (1032–85 CE) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107 CE) for less than a year, neither of them accepted Zhou's specific teaching on the *Taijitu*.⁷ While Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi, 1130–1200 CE) was influenced by the Cheng brothers' philosophical teachings in many ways, his own acquaintance with Zhou's work came through his friend, Zhang Shi (Chang Shih, 1133–80 CE).⁸ Zhu Xi would then establish Zhou Dunyi's reputation as a forerunner, by giving Zhou's thought prominence in his own teaching. Zhu Xi not only wrote two commentaries on Zhou Dunyi's two works and coauthored a debate on *Taijitu shuo* with Lu Xiangshan, he also quoted the full text of *Taijitu shuo* as the opening paragraph of his significant work *Jinsi lu* (*Reflection on Things at Hand*).⁹ Zhu Xi's implementation and adaptation of Zhou Dunyi's teaching may also account for the ways in which Zhu Xi himself was criticized for being unduly influenced by Daoism.¹⁰ Yet some scholars have argued that for two decades Zhu Xi himself did not openly teach the *Taijitu*, despite his clear and enthusiastic focus upon it.

Origin

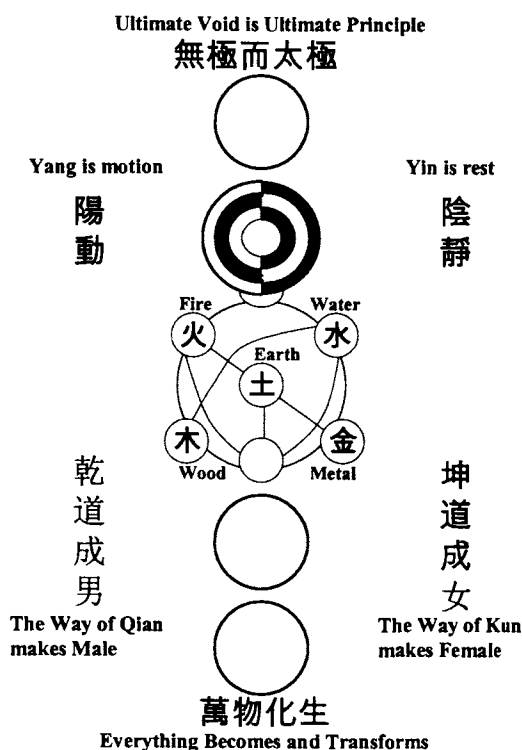
However controversial the precise nature of Zhou Dunyi's impact on later Neo-Confucians, even more obscure are the intellectual origins of Zhou Dunyi's diagram and its meaning. Many intellectual historians have made a reasonable case for both Daoist and Buddhist sources. Both explicitly participate and extend the tradition of using *xiang* (images) and *shu* (numbers) to explain the universe, this was first brought out explicitly in the *Yijing* (the *Book of Changes*). Within this *xiangshu* tradition, diagrams (*tu*) were a familiar and effective way to communicate knowledge, especially knowledge that was conceptual or of a schematic nature. Even in the *Analects*, for example, Confucius claims, "This river has not yet produced the *tu*" (*Analects* 9:8). His reference is to the River Chart (*hetu*), containing the original eight trigrams of the *Yijing*. The *hetu* was believed to have emerged from the Yellow River on the

⁷ Huang, *Essentials of Neo-Confucianism*, 86.

⁸ The complex story of the *Taijitu*'s transmission to Zhu Xi is well told in Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 38.

⁹ This text has been translated into English by Wing-tsit Chan, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.

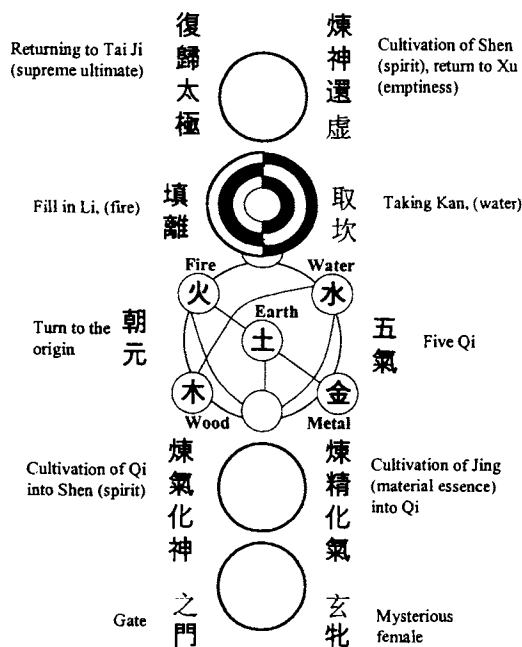
Figure One: Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu*

back of a dragon during the primordial time of Fuxi. Along with the Luo Writing (*luoshu*), which appeared on the back of a tortoise during the reign of legendary Emperor Yu, who mastered the art of controlling floods, these diagrams were well known during the Song dynasty. *Hetu* and *Luoshu* as magical squares and numbers were believed to represent some special patterns and the mystical harmony of the whole universe.

The *hetu* and *luoshu* serve only to ascertain the general context for Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu*. Within this context Buddhist and Daoist sages had offered a variety of diagrams to clarify their teachings. Of those that may have had direct effect on Zhou Dunyi, two are worth considering. First, the Diagram of the Alaya-vijnyana mapped out the path toward ultimate reality understood as *tathata*, or "storehouse consciousness."¹¹ While this Buddhist diagram, as presented by Julia Ching, reveals interesting parallels to Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu* (see figure 1) it is less likely a direct inspiration for it. The second, and more likely source is the *Wujitu* (*Diagram of the Great Void*, see figure 2), first associated with the Daoist hermit Chen Tuan (906–89 CE) who is said to have inscribed *Wujitu* in a cave on Hua Mountain (located near Xi'an). While

¹¹ Ibid., 18–19.

Figure Two: Chen Tuan's *Wujitu*



this diagram bears on its uncanny resemblance to the *Taijitu*, over the centuries there has been a long debate over who had this diagram first.¹² Another piece of evidence suggesting a connection to Chen Tuan is a poem, written by Zhou Dunyi expressing his confidence that "Chen Tuan had the mystery of *yin-yang*'s creative transformations."¹³

The remarkable similarities between Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu* and Chen Tuan's *Wujitu* may help to illuminate certain deeper meanings in the *Taijitu*. Let's examine each diagram in some detail. Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu* consists of five images along with six lines inscriptions. The first image is a circle placed directly under the inscription, "*Wuji er taiji*," as it is rendered by Zhu Xi, or "*Zi wuji er taiji*," as several commentators believe it was originally. The overall philosophical interpretation of the *Taijitu shuo* may hinge on these two formulas. The second image consists of interlocking blank and shaded areas forming six semicircles with a smaller blank circle in the middle. This image

¹² The origin of this diagram has been an on-going debate from centuries ago until today. The dominant view is that this is the Daoist diagram and Zhou Dunyi just took it and gave a Confucian span. However, recently contemporary scholar Li Shen presented many convincing evidences to argue that Zhou Dunyi, in fact, discovered this diagram and Daoist in Song Dynasty plagiarized it. See Li Shen, *The Examination of Yitu* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1993).

¹³ Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38.

is the combination of two trigrams from the *Yijing*. A correct reading of it should start from the middle and divide this image into two parts. The left part is *li* (fire), one of the eight *gua* (eight trigrams) turned on its side, with two light lines (*yang* line) outside and one dark line (*yin* line) inside. The right part is *kan* (water), another *gua* turned on its side, with two dark lines (*yin* line) outside and one light line (*yang* line) inside. Fire and water are two most important trigrams after the *gua* of *Qian* (heaven) and *Kun* (earth). On either side of these images are inscribed the words, *Yangdong* “Yang is motion” (on the left), *Yinjing* “Yin is rest” (on the right). These words acknowledge an unequivocal role to *yinyang* and its cosmic significance.

The third image of the *Taijitu* is the flow of five elements (*wuxing*) “fire,” “water,” “earth,” “wood,” and “metal,” a popular categorization of things since pre-Qin times. The last images, four and five, both contain a circle equal in size to those featured in the first image. On either side of image four is an inscription. On the left: “The Way of *Qian* makes male.” On the right: “The Way of *Kun* makes female.” The *Taijitu* is completed with an inscription centered under the last circle: “Everything becomes and transforms.” The *Taijitu* as a whole should read from top to bottom.

The origin of the *Wujitu* is attributed to Chen Tuan. It is supposed to describe the progress of Daoist practice of *neidan* (inner alchemy). The *Wujitu* consists of the exact same five images as *Taijitu*. Yet all inscriptions are different. The other most significant divergence between these two diagrams is that the *Wujitu* should be read from bottom to top, the opposite direction as the *Taijitu*.

The first image at the very bottom of *Wujitu* is the gate of the mysterious female, the starting point of alchemical cultivation and refinement. “It refers to the Elixir Field and Gate of Life in the human body, situated between the two kidneys. This is the place where the body’s Original Vital Breath is stored, and in which all Inner Alchemy takes root. In the vocabulary of Inner Alchemy, it is also called ‘obtaining the aperture.’”¹⁴

The second image describes a cyclic progress with two continuous movements. Beginning on the right side, one cultivates *jing* (material essence) into *qi*, then refines this *qi* into *shen* (spirit). “Here the Original Vital Breath of the first circle is transformed and refined; Post-Existent Material Essence is transformed into Pre-Existent Vital Breath, which is once again transformed into Pre-Existent Spirit. This level of skill is called Self-Refinement, and consists mainly in making post-existent Yin substance appear as pre-existent Spirit.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Liu Zhongyu in an essay published in a website by the Daoist Center of Hong Kong (www.eng.taoism.org.hk). The *Wujitu*’s connection with the Daoist practice of “inner alchemy” is explicit in its descriptions.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The third image illustrates the connection between *qi* and the five elements and how they all turn to the origin. "This is called 'The Five Vital Breaths Turn to the Origin,' 'Harmonization of the Five Vital Breaths,' or simply 'Harmonization.'"¹⁶

The fourth image is fashioned from the two trigrams, *Kan* and *Li*, of the *Yijing*. The inscription states "taking *kan* (water) to fill in *li* (fire)." "Once one has reached this state, one keeps to the essence of the body; the Elixir is Refined to maturity. This is called 'to obtain the Elixir Drug.'"¹⁷

The fifth image is the end of this journey and one has reached the highest stage of inner alchemy. Here is a portrayal from the fourth image to the closing stage:

The middle line of the *Kan* trigram is Yin and stands for substance; the middle line of the *Li* trigram is Yang and stands for emptiness. These two lines represent the interchange of the kidney's water and the heart's fire. When the Yang line of the *Kan* trigram is inserted into the *Li* trigram, one obtains the *Qian* trigram made up of three Yang lines, signifying the transformation of man into a pure Yang body. The topmost circle is called "Refining the Spirit to Return to Emptiness," a return to the Infinite. This means that after Obtaining the Elixir, one turns back to the Infinite, which is the Great Dao of Emptiness. After accomplishing the process of inner Alchemy, one discards the Sacred Embryo which has been Refined and becomes an Immortal—this is called to "Emerge from the Womb to seek Immortality."¹⁸

While Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu* seems to contain substantially the same images as Chen Tuan's *Wujitu*, reading from top to bottom rather than bottom to top yields a dramatic change in perspective. Chen Tuan's *Wujitu* reveals the Daoist practice of self-cultivation or "inner alchemy." This inner alchemy can be summarized into three central interrelated stages (a) cultivate *jing* (material essence) and transform it into *qi*; (b) cultivate *qi* and transform into *shen* (spirit); (c) cultivate spirit and return to emptiness (*huanxu* great void). These processes equip disciples with a map outlining the crucial points by which self-transformation is attained progressively. This journey leads practitioners to return to the "Infinite" or the "Void." But what happens when the process is reversed, as it is when one reads from top to bottom? This inquiry calls for a philosophical analysis of Zhou Dunyi's diagram.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Zhou Dunyi's diagram begins by declaring a basic presupposition: "*Wuji* is equated with *Taiji*," or stated progressively, "from *Wuji* emerges *Taiji*." The Supreme Ultimate is emergent, and with it comes the basic metaphysical principles of *Yin* and *Yang* from which transpire the myriad things and humanity. Zhou Dunyi's focal point thus is not on mapping the ascending stages of spiritual exercises that will eventually transform the self through a mystical absorption into the *Wuji* from which all things emanate. Instead, his focus is on the metaphysics implicit in such spiritual exercises, how following *Wuji* and *Taiji* is grounded in a dynamic ontology; this ontology would in turn establish a rational basis for authentically Confucian moral teachings and practices. How does Zhou Dunyi undertake this exceptional mission? Let's now turn to Zhou Dunyi's commentary on this diagram or *Taijitu shuo*.

Zhou's Commentary

Zhou Dunyi wrote only two philosophical works: *Taijitu shuo* (*Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained*) and *Tongshu* (*The Penetrating Text*). Of all the Song philosophers Zhou Dunyi produced the least yet caused the most commentaries of all. Most scholars from the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties have furnished commentaries on this work with such titles as, *shuo* (explain), *bian* (distinguish), *kao* (examine), and *lun* (discussion). Given that this short text has commanded such attention in the course of Chinese intellectual history, its 256 words deserve greater scrutiny by the field of Chinese philosophy today. The following is my own full translation of the *Taijitu shuo*.

Ultimate void is the supreme ultimate. The supreme ultimate moves (*dong*) therefore generates *yang*, when movement reaches its extreme, it generates rest (*jing*). Rest generates *yin*. When rest reaches its extreme, it will return to motion. Motion (*dong*) and rest (*jing*) alternate and become the root of each other. Thus the distinction between *yin* and *yang* is made and two forms (*liangyi*) are established. The transformation of *yang* with the unity of *yin* generates water, fire, wood, metal, and soil. As these five forces (*wuqi*) are diffused harmoniously the four seasons run their course. The five elements (*wuxing*) are one *yinyang*. *Yinyang* is the one supreme ultimate; the supreme ultimate is rooted in ultimate void. Five elements are generated with their own character. The true inherent quality of the ultimate void is the core of *er* (*yinyang*) and *wu* (five elements); their profound unity gives rise to all emergent things. The way of *qian* (heaven) makes male and the way of *kun* (earth) makes female, the interaction of these two *qi* generates and transforms the myriad things (ten thousands of things). The myriad things engender and renovate, there are boundless changes

and infinite transformations. Only those people who also receive these fine qualities become the most spiritual beings. Human physical form thus is generated and human spirit (*shen*) develops knowing. The arousing and the mutual interaction of five moral *xing* (*ren*, benevolence; *yi*, righteousness; *li*, propriety; *zhi*, wisdom; *xin*, trust) yield the distinction between good (*shan*) and bad (*e*), and thus all the human affairs begin. The sage attends to *zhong* (focus) *zheng* (correctness) *ren* (benevolence) *yi* (righteousness) and takes *zhujing* (extending equilibrium, quiescence, tranquility, rest) as the most fundamental (Zhou Dunyi provides an interpretation here: “*Zhujing* refers to having no desire *wuyu*”), and through these the sage sets up the ultimate standard for human being (*lirenji*). Therefore the virtue (*de*) of the sage is in harmony with heaven and earth; his brightness (*ming*) is identical with the sun and moon; his order (*xu*) is aligned with four seasons and his control of fortune and misfortune (*jiexiong*) corresponds with the spiritual beings. *Junzi* (the superior person) cultivates himself and it results in good fortune. *Xiaoren* (petty person) acts contrary to these qualities and it results in bad fortune. Therefore it is said that The way of the established heaven is *yin* and *yang*; the way of established earth is soft (*rou*) and hard (*gang*) and the way of established human being is *ren* benevolence and *yi* righteousness. It is also said: if we investigate the original beginning and returning to the final end we will understand the matter of life and death. Great is the *Yi* (*The Changes*), it is the most excellent!¹⁹

Many scholars have argued that this brief text was originally part of the *Tongshu* (*The Penetrating Text*).²⁰ Whether considered separately or read side by side, as commentators often advised, the *Taijitu shuo* and the *Tongshu* are embedded in the philosophy of the *Yijing* and the *Zhongyong*. Within the broadly Confucian outlook afforded by these classics, Zhou Dunyi employs the *Taijitu shuo* to weave in convictions normally associated with Daoism and Buddhism. The *Taijitu shuo* can be divided roughly into three parts. The first part is metaphysics, the discussion of the origin and progress of the universe. The second part is ethics, the emergence of human morality and the derivation of an ultimate standard for human beings. The third part is the summary in which the Dao (Way) of the sages is reaffirmed and grounded specifically in unity with heaven and earth.

¹⁹ My own translation from *The Collections of Works of Zhouzi* (Zhou Dunyi) (Shanghai: Guji Press, 2000), 20.

²⁰ Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. II: *The Period of Classical Learning*, tr. Derek Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 442, n. 3.

In the first part, Zhou Dunyi's metaphysics develops from the paradoxical equation of *wuji* and *taiji*. *Wuji* or "ultimate void" is affirmed as the unconditional beginning of the universe. The very word "*wuji*" can be traced back to its original use in the *Daodejing*, chapter 28, where Laozi speaks of "returning to *wuji*." Literally, *wuji* is "without limit" or defining boundaries, an inchoate state that in the world may be likened to a ravine carved out by water flowing wherever the land is at its lowest point, or to unhewn wood that is unmarked by human hands but still full of potential. Among human beings returning to *wuji* is "returning to the state of infancy," and not coincidentally, "knowing the male, while keeping to the female." It represents an unsurpassable lowliness that Laozi suggests as a model for authentic—because constant—virtue. Thus, already in its first use in the *Daodejing*, *wuji* provides a link between metaphysics and ethics. As a metaphysical beginning, however, it is undifferentiated negativity. Because *wuji* is prior to all limits or defining boundaries, nothing can positively be said of it. There is in *wuji*, for example, no *yinyang* movement or rest; and if there is no *yinyang* interaction, there can hardly be anything else as long as *wuji* is identifiable only with itself.

But paradoxically *wuji* is *taiji*, the "supreme ultimate" where *yinyang*, movement and rest, are generated. Though Zhu Xi later characterizes *taiji* as "*li*" (the ultimate principle) operative in all reality, and has little to say about *wuji*, Zhou Dunyi's teachings do not unfold at that level of abstraction.²¹ Instead Zhou Dunyi declares that the movement and rest of *yinyang* interaction generate the five elements, water, fire, wood, metal, and soil, as the five primordial forms of "*qi*" constitutive of the myriad things and, ultimately, human beings.

While no one has solved the problem of how the universe could be produced by the supreme ultimate, Zhou Dunyi's contribution is to identify directly and clearly *yinyang* with *dongjing* (movement and rest) as critical to the generation of the universe. By characterizing *yinyang* in terms of the polarity of movement (*dong*) and rest (*jing*), or activity and stillness, Zhou Dunyi opens up a line of inquiry that remains philosophically promising to this day. As representative of *yinyang* interactions generally, rest and movement occur in fluctuating or alternating patterns, even though within *taiji* itself, as Fung Yu-lan remarks, "it is possible for both of these phases to be concurrently present."²² In other words, on the one hand, neither *yin* nor *yang*

²¹ Fung Yu-lan argues that the one passing reference to "*li*" in Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu* is consonant with Zhu Xi's later polar distinction of "*li*" and "*qi*," as if Zhou Dunyi would agree that "*taiji*" can be equated with "*li*" and the *yinyang* forces with "*qi*." This interpretation seems forced, but quite understandable, given the usual tendency to understand Zhou Dunyi primarily in light of Zhu Xi's tendentious reading of his works. Ibid., 444–45.

²² Ibid., 443.

is absolutely prior to the other, or more powerful, or more dominant; on the other hand, their concurrence is logically and metaphysically necessary. Here is Zhou Dunyi's more detailed articulation from the *Tongshu*, chapter 16:

Activity as the absence of stillness and stillness as the absence of activity characterize things (*wu*). Activity that is not [empirically] active and stillness that is not [empirically] still characterize spirit (*shen*). Being active and yet not active, still and yet not still, does not mean that [spirit] is neither active nor still. For while things do not [inter] penetrate (*tong*), spirit subtly [pervades] the myriad things.

The *yin* of water is based in *yang*; the *yang* of fire is based in *yin*. The Five Phases are *yin* and *yang*; *yin* and *yang* are the Supreme Polarity. The Four Seasons revolve: the myriad things end and begin [again]. How undifferentiated! How extensive! And how inexhaustible! (5:33b–34b)²³

What is inimitable about *yin* and *yang* interactions in the dimension of *shen* (spirit) is that they are not restricted by the law of logical noncontradiction (“A thing cannot simultaneously be and not be in the same time and place, and in the same aspects”). The formulation of the metaphysical paradox of *yinyang* as *dongjing* (movement and rest) in the supreme ultimate, however, is carefully distinguished from the realm of the myriad things and the human beings that are generated by their interactions.

While later Neo-Confucians, following Zhu Xi, would to express critical reservations about Zhou Dunyi's construction of the *yinyang* dynamic within *taiji* itself, he remains the first to explicate these forces in terms of *dong* and *jing*. This is one of Zhou Dunyi's major philosophical contributions to *yinyang* theory. The concept of *yinyang* had been employed to construct a justification for the structure of universe since the *Yijing*. The *Yijing* declares “The unceasing transition between *yin* and *yang* is called *Dao*.”²⁴ And “*Taiji* produce two basic symbolic forms (*eryi*, namely, *yin* and *yang*); the two basic symbolic forms produce the four figures and the four figures produce eight trigrams.”²⁵ We also read from the *Daodejing*, chapter 42, “Everything carries

²³ William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600 (Volume One)*, second ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 678. The de Bary and Bloom translation of *taiji* as “Supreme Polarity” is consistent with their translation of the same term in the *Taijitu shuo*. They argue for the superiority of their translation over other possibilities, including “Supreme Ultimate,” because “*taiji* is the *yin-yang* principle of bipolarity, which is the most fundamental ordering principle, the cosmic “first principle” (p. 672). Their translation of *wuji* as “Non-Polar” follows from this translation of *taiji*, which they claim is consistent with Daoist usages likely to be familiar to Zhou Dunyi.

²⁴ I am grateful to my reader at the *Journal of the History of Ideas* for providing this translation.

²⁵ My own translation from “Xisi” of the *Yijing*.

yin and embraces *yang*, through blending these *qi* they attain harmony.”²⁶ These classics would argue that *yinyang* are the main forces penetrating all beings in the universe. However, they fall short of disclosing how and in what ways *yinyang* perform their functions and undertakings. Zhou Dunyi correlates *dong* and *jing* with *yang* and *yin* and confers a specific framework to the *yinyang* theory. The functions of *yang* and *yin* are manifested in the form of *dong* (movement) and *jing* (rest), in other words, *dong* and *jing* are modes of *yinyang* activity. Following Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi identifies *yin* and *yang* with his core concepts of *ti* (embodiment) and *yong* (function).

Everything begins from one source, and the one source, the Supreme ultimate (*taiji*) as Ultimate void (*wuji*), is itself unlimited, undifferentiated, uncaused, and beyond the ontological dynamics of movement (*yang*) and rest (*yin*) apparent in the myriad things and human beings. Zhou Dunyi thus uses movement and rest to define the ontological significance of *yang* and *yin*. Fung Yu-lan, commenting on Zhu Xi’s interpretation of Zhou Dunyi, says: “Spoken of in this way, the Supreme Ultimate is very much like what Plato called the Idea of the Good, or what Aristotle called God.”²⁷

Nevertheless, the differences are equally fundamental. *Wuji/taiji* is emphatically nontheistic, for it cannot be understood as God in any way that might confuse it with the specific teachings of “classical theism.” In Zhou Dunyi’s account, there is no hint of personhood, no attributes suggesting the presence of a Supreme Being who actively creates the world through the exercise of His unsurpassable intellect and will. Though *Wuji/taiji* and God are both invoked metaphysically as the ultimate explanation for reality, and as the ultimate foundation for morality among human beings, each fulfills these philosophical tasks in very different ways. In Zhou Dunyi’s account the metaphysical unity of all things is primary; their differentiation into a multiplicity of things is secondary. Within this assumption of primordial unity, the task of metaphysics is to give a coherent account of the patterned interrelationships of all things. The patterned polarities apparent in the myriad things as well as in human relationships are neither ultimate nor ultimately in opposition to each other. This is Zhou Dunyi’s particular construction for the foundations of Neo-Confucianism.

Zhou’s Ethics

After giving an account of his metaphysics in the first 123 words of the *Taijitu shuo*, Zhou Dunyi turns his attention to morality. The second part of the *Taijitu shuo* consists of Zhou’s ethics, which derives the ultimate standard

²⁶ My own translation.

²⁷ Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 537.

for human being from the preceding metaphysics. As Zhou's *Taijitu* advocates, the *yinyang* theory remains constitutive of human moral standards for, properly valued, the cultivation of *yinyang* harmonies in all human relationships is central to ethics. According to Zhou Dunyi the interactions of *yinyang* and the five elements in human beings produce "the most spiritual beings." These interactions also constitute the unity of human beings, an undifferentiated unity of body, mind, and spirit. The movements of *yinyang* and the five elements in human being give rise to the five moral *xing* (*ren*, benevolence; *yi*, righteousness; *li*, propriety; *zhi*, wisdom; *xin*, trust) because they are inherent in the metaphysical nature and are patterned from the universe. Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu* (Chapter 7) clarifies the way in which *xing* (human nature) itself is based in the *yinyang* interactions, which themselves contain the possibility of experiencing and responding to both good and bad:

In nature, there are hardness and softness (which may result in) goodness or evil. All (is right) when there is the mean (*zhong*). (This explanation) not being understood, (Zhou) continued: The goodness that results from hardness consists of righteousness (*yi*), straightforwardness (*chih*), decisiveness, strictness, firmness, determination, and steadfastness. The evil resulting from it consists of ruthlessness, intolerance, force, and violence. The goodness that results from softness consists of compliance and docility. The evil resulting from it consists of weakness of will, indecisiveness, and underhanded sycophancy. The mean (*zhong*) signifies harmony and proper proportion. This alone is the highest Way (*Tao*) of the world and the concern of the sage. Hence the sage emphasizes those teachings which will cause men to reform their evils of themselves, proceed of themselves to the mean, and there stop.²⁸

Since *xing* necessarily result from the *yinyang* interactions, inherent in them are the dynamic polarity of *gang* (hardness) and *rou* (softness) whose *zhong* (equilibrium) inevitably can be disturbed. When these dynamics are in focus, well-balanced or otherwise poised in harmony, there is *shan* (goodness); when they are in disequilibrium, there is *e* (bad). Human affairs, with all their moral implications, unfold not at the command of an ultimate law-giver, but from the experience of living harmoniously as human beings. From this point, Zhou Dunyi clarifies what makes a human being a sage and what *should be* the ultimate standard for human being (*renji*). There are two innermost features of a sage: (a) the sage is capable of *zhong zheng* (focus) on *ren* and *yi*; and (b) the sage is centered on *jing* (equilibrium). The former emphasis

²⁸ This passage from the *Tongshu* is quoted in Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 447.

in Zhou's view of the sage echoes the Confucian *Zhongyong* tradition and earns him the title of Confucian despite the Daoist-rich metaphysics. The latter characteristic of a sage, namely, *zhujing*, implies a few intriguing positions for Confucian ethics.

First, the emphasis on *jing* is further confirmation of the Daoist and Buddhist influences. Before Zhou's time the word *jing* is found mostly in Daoist or Buddhist texts. In the *Daodejing* (chapter 16), for example, we are told that the sage is urged to "extend your utmost emptiness as far as you can, and do your best to preserve your equilibrium . . . returning to the root is called equilibrium (*jing*)."²⁹ While Laozi's *shoujing* is translated as "preserve your equilibrium," the term used by Zhou Dunyi is *zhujing*, meaning to "extend your equilibrium." The difference between *shoujing* and *zhujing* seems to shift the emphasis from exercises designed to restore a primordial state to those designed for open-ended spiritual growth.

Second, the usage of *jing* also reveals a distinctively Neo-Confucian vision of self-cultivation. Zhou Dunyi provides a rare annotation next to the word *zhujing*. Zhou specifies that this *jing* means *wuyu* (no desire). This is quite an audacious leap from classical Confucianism on the issue of human desire. Zhou Dunyi might be the first to introduce Laozi's concept of "*wu*" (void, empty) into Confucianism and to treat it as emblematic of the ultimate source of universe. His breakthrough recalls chapter 40 of the *Daodejing*, where Laozi says: "Everything is generated (*shen*) from *you* (something) and *you* (something) is generated from *wu* (nothing)."³⁰ This concept of *wu*, however, was also extended to the realm of morality and human desires. Confucius and Mencius both acknowledge human desire and advocate *jieyu* (limiting or controlling desire). Even Laozi talks about *guayu* (less desire). But none of them would concur with *wuyu* (no desire), which could imply the negation of all human desires. This ambiguity in *wuyu* later is reflected in Zhu Xi's formulation of the motto of Neo-Confucianism: "Restoring the Heavenly Principle and diminishing human desires." Due to this historical turn of events, Zhou Dunyi was to be criticized by a contemporary Chinese scholar for diminishing the humanism inherent in classical Confucianism.³¹

Zhou Dunyi expands the *Daodejing* (chapter 37), where Laozi says: "In not desiring, one will achieve *jing*, and *tian* (heaven) and *di* (earth) will be ordered by themselves."³² Since heaven and earth are already in harmony with one another, the *raison d'être* of *jing* is to ensure that human beings are properly oriented to them. The apparent circularity of Zhou Dunyi's reasoning

²⁹ Roger Ames's translation.

³⁰ My own translation.

³¹ Yufu Chen, *Biography of Zhou Dunyi* (Taiwan: Dongda Press, 1993).

³² My own translation.

about self-cultivation may be resolved by considering the following comment from the *Tongshu* (chapter 20):

[Someone asked:] "Can Sagehood be learned?" Reply: It can. "Are there essentials (*yao*)?" Reply: There are. "I beg to hear them." Reply: To be unified (*yi*) is essential. To be unified is to have no desire. Without desire one is vacuous when still [*jing*] and direct in activity. Being vacuous when still, one will be clear (*ming*); being clear one will be penetrating (*tong*). Being direct in activity one will be impartial (*gong*); being impartial one will be all-embracing (*pu*). Being clear and penetrating, impartial and all-embracing, one is almost [a sage]. (5:38b)³³

To explicate Zhou Dunyi's focus on *jing* further, Fung Yu-lan cites Mencius' claim regarding a human being's natural response to seeing a child about to fall into a well.³⁴ The person in a state of *jing* will react straightforwardly to save the child, without any thought for her own personal safety or possible reward. Any calculation of harm or benefit renders the action suspect as motivated by selfishness. Thus achieving equilibrium (*jing*) means the absence of desire that would impair the flow of natural human reactions. Thinking without desire (*wuyu*) represents a cultivated disposition in which the mind can be compared, as Zhuangzi once articulated, with a "shining mirror," that is, a mind clear, penetrating, impartial, and all-embracing. The core of Confucian ethics rests upon the attainment through self-cultivation of a state of mind equivalent to returning to the void (*wuji*).

Wuyu (no desire) and *zhujing* (extending equilibrium) disclose not only the path to becoming a sage, but also how a sage functions. However, becoming a sage has an even greater depth. Zhou Dunyi follows the *Zhongyong* tradition and asserts that *cheng*³⁵ defines the depth of sagehood and thus morality in human nature. In the opening sentence of *Tongshu*, Zhou Dunyi claims "*Cheng* is the foundation of sage. . . . It is also the foundation of the

³³ This translation of the *Tongshu* is taken from de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 678.

³⁴ Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 449.

³⁵ The Chinese word *cheng* is a very important yet complicated concept. There are several possible translations of *cheng* available in various texts. "Authenticity" or "sincerity" are popular translations. An intriguing alternative is proposed in Ames and Hall's translation of the *Zhongyong* (*Focusing the Familiar*). They translate *cheng* as "creativity." This term, well informed by the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne and their followers, clearly captures the metaphysical flavor of *cheng*, but perhaps not its ethical connotation. I would prefer to leave it untranslated. "Authenticity" is the term used in de Bary and Bloom's translations from Zhou Dunyi's *Tongshu*.

five virtues and the source of a sage's action."³⁶ *Cheng* is especially characteristic of a genuine sage. The *Tongshu* (chapter 4) asserts:

That which is completely silent and inactive is authenticity [*cheng*]. That which penetrates when stimulated is spirit (*shen*). That which is active but not yet formed, between existing and not existing is incipient. Authenticity is of the essence (*jing*), and therefore clear. Spirit is responsive, and therefore mysterious. Incipience is subtle, and therefore obscure. One who is authentic, spiritual, and incipient [*cheng, shen, ji*] is called a sage. (5:17b–18a)³⁷

Cheng as “the root of the sage” is manifest in normative principles, the cultivation which enables one to become a sage. Because humanity's harmony with heaven and earth consists in these, through their cultivation a sage establishes the ultimate moral standards for human beings: the achievement of *jing*, which appropriately leads to the cultivation of benevolence and righteousness.

After opening a new path from metaphysics to ethics and launching the ultimate standard for humanity, Zhou Dunyi summarizes in the third part of the *Taijitu shuo*. Zhou Dunyi encapsulates the pertinent unification between this new Confucian metaphysics and classical Confucian morality, and deploys it substantively as a rational justification for his formulation of an ultimate standard for human beings. What is invoked in the last few lines is the authority warranting his innovation. Justified by the *Yijing*, Zhou Dunyi quotes:

The Way of established heaven is *yin* and *yang*; the Way of established earth is soft and hard; the Way of established human being is benevolence and righteousness.

Zhou Dunyi reminds the reader that his *Taijitu shuo* perfectly emulates this grand vision of the unity of heaven, earth, and humanity that has served as an ideal since the time of *Yijing*.

Conclusion

Zhu Xi established an important place for Zhou Dunyi in the history of Chinese philosophy. Without Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi's work might have been forgotten or abandoned by subsequent generations of Chinese philosophers.

³⁶ My own translation from *The Collections of Works of Zhouzi* (Shanghai: Guji Press, 2000), 31–32.

³⁷ This translation is that presented by de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 677–678.

But if Zhu Xi's synthesis sought to refute both Daoism and Buddhism by selectively adapting certain elements from both traditions into Confucian philosophy, Zhou Dunyi's work arguably can be appreciated as refuting of Han Confucianism by selectively adapting certain elements of Confucian moral teaching into an essentially Daoist metaphysics. Zhou Dunyi, while rightly regarded as a precursor of Neo-Confucianism, opens up possibilities that would not be followed by later Neo-Confucians. In fact Zhou Dunyi's work in some ways might be thought to represent a challenge to Neo-Confucianism.

The *Taijitu* and *Taijitu shuo* take a cosmology derived from the Daoist and Buddhist tradition, and transform it into a dynamic and progressive Confucian metaphysics. This metaphysical vision of the universe sustains a Confucian account of morality that can be convincingly justified. As the above discussion suggests, not only did Zhou Dunyi's derivation of the universe from the primordial *taiji* that is also *wuji* appropriately yield certain seminal components of metaphysics, but also its ethical implication follow naturally from such a view. The universe, as Zhou Dunyi envisioned it, consists in a series of grand correlations through *yinjing* and *yangdong* interactions. Humanity is the central focus of these correlations where the *yinyang* interactions have brought forth a cultivated human being participating consciously in the extension of the cosmic order established from *wuji/taiji*. The moral virtues, such as *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness) are patterns reflecting the *yinyang* interactions that constitute the universe. Zhou Dunyi has supplied a sound metaphysical foundation for Confucian morality. One interesting point in *Tongshu* (chapter 11) might be worthy of mention. Zhou Dunyi maintains "Heaven generates (*sheng*) the myriad things through *yang*, and completes (*cheng*) them through *yin*. Generation (*sheng*) is *ren* (benevolence); completion (*cheng*) is *yi* (righteousness). Therefore, the sage is up on high, cultivating the myriad things through *ren* and correcting (*zheng*) people through *yi*. Through the movement of the *Dao* of heaven everything will attain harmony; through the cultivation of sagely virtue the people will be transformed."³⁸ Human morality mirrors the basic pattern of order emergent in the universe. Just as *taiji* consists of both *yin* and *yang*, the proper conduct of human affairs requires both the softness of benevolence and the hardness of justice.

Loyola Marymount University.

³⁸ My own translation.